



EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ONLINE LEARNING IN GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION: IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Quality assurance in global higher education is a top policy consideration for many nations. Since the 1980s, global universities, in response to government and societal pressure, have become more business-like and enterprising to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the so-called global knowledge economy. This corporatization of higher education is tied to increasing enrollments and intensification of educational quality assurance of online learning. But the pandemic brought rapid and substantial change to the use of online learning because it was the only service available to continue education. What now, has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the relationships between online learning and quality assurance?

KEY WORDS: quality assurance, technology, global higher education, online learning.

INTRODUCTION:

The evolution of information and communication technology, the rapid pace of technological change, the increased costs of education, and the demand for quality programs are all factors driving global higher education institutions to examine the quality of their programs as well as the quality of the overall learning experience they provide, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Karalis, 2020). Competition among global higher education institutions for students will be won based on the quality of the student experience provided, especially online (Waller, Lemoine, Garretson, & Richardson, 2020). In the COVID-19 pandemic when medical, ecological, social, cultural and economic challenges require innovative solutions and new concepts, global higher education should deliver both creativity for sustainability and resilience for quality assurance, both through online learning (Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, & Glowatz, 2020).

QUALITY ASSURANCE:

Global higher education institutions are under intense scrutiny for their productivity, especially their capability to assure quality of teaching and learning (Glendinning, 2020). The quality of the institution is evaluated in terms of its "performance" as indicated by performance indicators, and effectiveness is assessed in terms of quality assurance (Varouchas, Sicilia, & Sánchez-Alonso, 2018). Quality assurance, the new accountability, gives a global higher education institution the evidence it needs to make changes to enhance productivity, particularly through increased student attainment (Beerkens, 2018). Governments across the world have steadily minimized their support for public higher education, and costs associated with gaining a degree have constantly increased over the last decade (Austin & Jones, 2018). Citizens and bureaucrats in many countries are asking more frequently what tangible benefits the society is receiving for the tax revenues being spent on higher education (Igbinakase & Naidoo, 2020). Now that society has assumed a global focus, supported and sustained by technology, global higher education institutions are asked to offer the highest quality education to a widely diverse audience at a cost that can be supported by government (Miller & Nadler, 2020). As a result, quality assurance in global higher education is now a critical topic (Seipel & Ferrari, 2019). With the public urging higher education programs to move toward quality assurance, at a lower cost, it is essential that leaders of education programs assure their program quality (Richardson, Garretson, Waller & Lemoine, 2019).

A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT:

The growing emphasis on outcomes and standards appears to herald the promise of more dramatic techniques for assessing and evaluating teaching and student outcomes within the global context (Rosa & Amaral, 2017). In this global society, students desire a degree, not an education, with their goals often limited to the acquisition of skills needed for employment and maximizing income. Within this context, universities are being pushed to produce knowledgeable students that society and employers deem valuable, i.e. employability, not knowledge (Ellis & Hogard, 2019). Additionally, higher education institutions are being asked to graduate more students by increasing the standards of quality while simultaneously becoming more efficient, effective and productive organizations (Richardson, Garretson, Waller, & Lemoine, 2019).

Globally, higher educational institutions have been subjected to externally driven demands for accountability that have not proven to be effective (Makhoul, 2019). Irrespective of the ineffectiveness, numerous countries have advocated

strong external accountability without understanding the low organizational capacity of the global higher education institutions to deliver critical productivity (Waller, Lemoine, Mense, & Richardson, 2020).

ONLINE EDUCATION:

Online education became the go to solution for the COVID-19 pandemic because no other solution appeared viable to global higher education leaders, particularly after Chinese higher education institutions were the first to move to totally online education (Huang, Liu, & Zhan, 2020). Prior to the pandemic increased growth in online programs and high attrition rates had raised questions about the quality of online teaching and learning (Simplicio, 2019). Students enrolled in online courses had a 20% higher attrition rate than traditional campus students (Richardson, Sheeks, Waller, & Lemoine, 2020). Success in the online learning environment was dependent on (a) accessibility of online content, (b) availability of web resources, (c) instructor preparation, and (d) readily accessible online help services (McDougald, 2020). During the pandemic not all four prerequisites were available for all students (Jena, 2020).

High attrition rates have a negative economic impact on universities due to the costs for development, delivery, and assessment, as well as lost tuition revenue (Conrad & Openo, 2018). In addition, to the economic reasons, attrition is a measure used to determine the quality of education delivered by an institution. If there is a high attrition rate, the perception is that the institution has a quality problem (Smidt & Li, 2019).

Identifying the reasons students drop or fail courses is critical in determining what services and delivery methods the institution will need to provide in order to ensure successful completion of online classes and demonstrate quality assurance during the pandemic (Waller, Lemoine, & Richardson, 2020). Successfully addressing issues of attrition and retention in online education is imperative as it often viewed as a proxy for quality (Sonmez, 2019). Thus, the focus needs to be on flexibility, learning and development of new knowledge and adaptability instead of specific solutions as demonstrated by the pandemic (Blano & Metcalfe, 2020). Will the pandemic force global higher education to fully accept online instruction as a viable option to classroom instruction (Tereseviciene, Trepule, Dausiene, Tamoliune, & Costa, 2020)?

CONCLUSIONS:

- (1) Global higher education should focus on the quality of learning.
- (2) The COVID-19 pandemic has forced global higher education to reassess and modify the use of online learning.
- (3) The confluence of technology and quality assurance make new instructional delivery systems, new learning activities, and new learning opportunities imperative for global higher education.
- (4) The survival of global higher education may depend on the ability of educators to demonstrate quality assurance in a chaotic marketplace driven by COVID-19.
- (5) The ever-growing influence of technology to e-learning during the pandemic forces global higher education institutions to continue their pursuit of

quality assurance.

- (6) Lack of student success in online learning creates a stronger need for quality assurance because the primary goal of higher education is maximization of student learning and development.
- (7) Since most institutions were unprepared to take instruction totally online during the pandemic, how will they respond to totally online assessment and evaluation?

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